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THE RED HOST COMES HOME TO DIE

By NEGLEY FARSON.

GREAT, green and purple rocked mountains; storm clouds pouring in from the Pacific; rain! driving rain, drenching the forests, forests of spruce, of cedar, of fir—thick as the hair on the back of a dog—a wind twisted, crashing inferno. Hear the thundering roar of the Robinson, sluicing down toward the sea, its rapids, milk white, foaming, swift as a hydraulic jet.

"Hell!" said the hatchery man, "don't think we'll make it!"

I couldn't talk. "Just one more stroke—and then die!" I groaned to myself (said the same thing once at Poughkeepsie!): and, at last, we entered the reach.

"McPherson," I said, when the spots had cleared out of my vision, "the salmon aren't worth it. Nothing is worth so much torture."

McPherson was lighting his pipe—upside down—defiant of rain. He bobbed his head at the pool.

I looked over the side . . . and saw the Red Host! Great, red, pale eyed salmon stared up from its depths; an army passed, phantomlike, underneath. Weary, covered with sores, they shot in from their fight with the stream, rested, and then silently took up their march. Hundreds and hundreds of salmon, up from the sea, to spawn . . . *and then die!*"*

"Ghosts?"

"Ay," said McPherson, "they're ghosts, right enough. Come three weeks every one will be dead. Look at that buck! he's half dead already."

I looked at the fish, a diseased, distorted, miserable thing. It seemed hard to believe that only a month or so back he had flashed through the salt water like silver. Then had come the Urge; he had turned his nose toward fresh water—the stream he had been born in two years before—the scales had dropped off his back, to be replaced by soft, spongy flesh; his jaws had become hooked, the teeth emerging until, like some savage, red dog, he entered the Straits of Juan de Fuca. Fasting, intent with his mission, he had escaped the weirs, wheels and nets of the canners, fought the swollen flood of the river; leaped, twisted and mounted the falls, won past the spears of the Siwash——

"I have seen them," McPherson broke in on my thoughts, "a male and a female, comin' upstream with a gang of Rainbows trailing their wake . . . like a wolf pack hanging on to the flank. Ay, and I've seen the old buck turn and chase them away from her . . . "

"Guts!" McPherson grated the words, "pound for pound, inch for inch, the salmon's the gamest thing in this world. An' you say they're not worth it!"

Up to that moment salmon to me had been something that came in a tin. A hint to the grocer would land the thing on my table. But McPherson was telling me things:

"An' for what? In a few weeks every one will be dead. They'll raise a stink in the land. Ye'll see them clogging the bars; this water will fall and leave them in lines on the banks. Ducks will come in here in swarms and stuff themselves so full of dead, rotten fish that their own flesh'll taste worse than poison! Ay, and the bears make a bloody mess on the snows. Millions and millions of salmon get snuffed out like a candle . . . "

"Why?" I asked, meekly.

The ire of McPherson came forth in a snort: "'Why'! Now, ask me another. Could I—or any other man—tell you why Nature is the damn fool that she is you and I wouldn't be sitting out here in this tub, in this damned awful weather."

Coming up lake in the hatchery launch, a condemned Japanese fisherman, McPherson had talked of his work, explaining the need for such effort. Between nature and man, he contended, the salmon were on the verge of extinction. Left an orphan at birth (could you call an egg that?) a salmon egg has just one chance in a thousand of producing a fish that will eventually return to complete the tragic life cycle of his existence, i. e., to propagate his species. 1 to 1,000! Bad chances, indeed! Hence the hatchery!

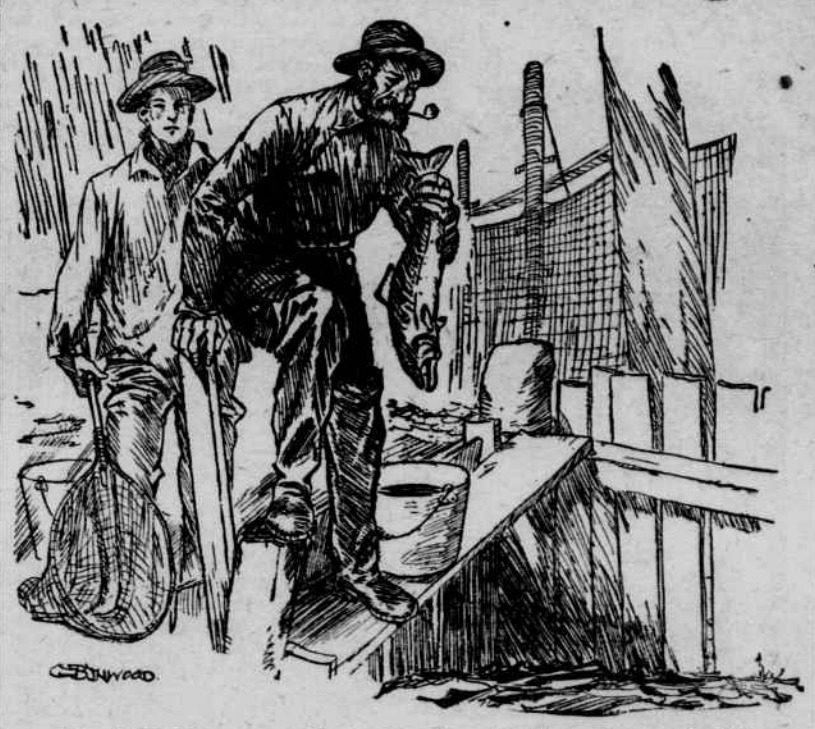
The hatchery betters the odds, gets the fish out of the egg, past the fry and well into the fingerling stage . . . and then turns him loose. He is a bit of a lad then, able to take care of himself, and even a cut throat trout will have to move some to catch him. Thus spoke McPherson:

"Eggs! Give me the eggs—and enough retaining ponds—and I'll restock the ocean!"

There are those who maintain that the hatcheries have not proved their worth, that all their work is but a drop in the bucket. But I mentioned this not to McPherson. A Scot on the make or in pursuit of his hobby . . . ! Besides he had raised his work to an art.

See him standing there on the rim of the fish trap. He has a salmon clasped by the tail. His right elbow pinions its head to his side. The trained fingers slide along the cohoe's stomach toward the vent. . . . A stream of carnelian globules shoot into the pail. Beautiful things! about the size of a current. "Ay," McPherson puffs on his pipe, "she's a bonny fush!"

He speaks as if he were milking a prize Holstein!



"Ay," McPherson puffs in his pipe, "she's a bonny fush!"

"A mar-rvellous fush! Le's have another"

I dip the net into the box, formed by the upright wooden slats of the trap . . . and chase 'round a fish until I catch it.

"Buck!" says McPherson, after the barest of glances. The mitted left hand closes over the tail; the fifteen pound fish swings, and with a quick flip of that well trained elbow McPherson imprisons the head. Again the nubbly, intelligent fingers slide toward the vent. A stream—fluid, this time, quite milklike—shoots into the pail. He turns and directs it into another pail of those amber red eggs. . . Then he flings the fish back into the crystal clear stream, where, as far as I can make out, it swims off feeling quite cheery and bright.

Like some alchemist of old the Scot peers into the bucket, and gently, oh! so gently, he lets a soft flow of water seep down over the brim and across the fertilizing eggs. "*Look!*"

I see the miracle take place in the bucket! A gossamer mist floats over the eggs, almost imperceptible, so fine is its fabric. It is the changing of color. Now each egg is distinct, wrapped in its own little robe of Creation. A white spot on each shows that Life is now there.

Magic!

Some have quickly turned a light coral in color. These McPherson deftly extracts and casts from him. They are already dead. He goes over his "babies."

By now I am feeling his fatherly interest. I go after the last fish in the trap. A queer pair, the two of us, the Scot and I, in that mountain stream in British Columbia. And a queer fish, that in the trap. A thumping big buck, already far gone toward spawning: the hook nose and dog teeth showing plainly. Some males are so distorted this way, with the growth of reproductive organs inside them, that the jaws shut on each side of each other—like shears! This fellow looks vicious. Also, the fish trap is but a rickety contraption. We face each other, the pale yellow eyes of the salmon eyeing me malevolently.

"Hoot!" the landing net is snatched from my hands; with one deft, well practiced dab McPherson has ended the battle. In a trice the big fish is locked in the grip. McPherson leans over a pail. . . .

I like to picture him there, mist wreaths curling about him—smokelike—his red beard a flame. He might be some high priest, conducting a rite—a Siwash *shaman*, perhaps; for the myths of the Haida are peopled with salmon. High prowed canoes, Siwash, McPherson, the salmon; they all belong in this picture. The old Northwest that is passing! And, McPherson—with his pails of red eggs—fighting a rear guard action. . . . Against . . .? Well, against Time, perhaps; Time and the canners!

"A Godless lot," McPherson describes them, "with thought for naught but themselves."

Their money has made them a power in politics, strong enough to defeat any laws being made that would place a ban upon unlimited fishing. "Money!" curses McPherson, "'tis all they are after. Catch all the fish that they can and . . . to hell with the future!"

And the future is the particular concern of McPherson: "Take care of those eggs!" he regards me, appraisingly, before letting go of the buckets.

I stand there in the stream, the water pouring into my boots. "Take care of the eggs!" I exclaim. "If you're not jolly quick about passing them over I'll pitch the whole lot in the drink!"

For an instant a maniacal light flares in the blue eyes above me—panther hunters have seen it when in chase of the cubs—and I wade hurriedly off into the stream—the sacred buckets held high overhead. McPherson, with magnificent assurance, runs along the 3x3 wall of the fish trap and so gets to shore. We make our way through dank undergrowth, dripping alders, devil's club thorns and around the pillarlike trunks of gigantic spruce and at last deposit the black painted buckets safely on the floor boards of the boat.

But the danger is not yet behind us; there is the river! Great snags hurtle past us; gaunt, twisted branches clawing armlike at the air. A merganser comes, like a bullet, up stream, making time, his red, wicked head stretched out like a spear point. McPherson blasphemes!

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*[All five species of the *Oncorhynchus*—the Pacific coast salmon—spawn but once and then die. Sockeye, Spring and Dog Salmon have a four years cycle of life; Cohoes and Humpbacks two years. In some cases, such as the Fraser and Nass, there is also a small run of Sockeyes having a five year life cycle.]

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